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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined the way in which literacy is perceived by illiterate adults. To identify the perceptions of illiterate adults toward literacy, researchers conducted in-depth unstructured interviews with 40 illiterate native English speaking adults living in a northeastern urban area. Half the members of the study sample are currently participating in local literacy programs. While the illiterate adults interviewed all agreed tha' 't would be nice to know how to read and write, some of those sur ed feared that the development of literacy skills and the subsequent increase in independence that literacy brings may entail losing one's place in the fabric of social life that exists in largely illiterate subcultures. A positive sense of community, with illiteracy as one of the factors contributing to it, often combines with negative images of literate people as individuals who lack common sense, thus leading many illiterate adults to desire literacy skills only instrumentally. At least in the present study sample, illiteracy is viewed as a continuum. On the one end, it is most positively tied to one's place in the community. On the other end, however, it is identified as a degrading lack in the eyes of the larger society. (MN)

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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:

LITERACY AS PERCEIVED BY ILLITERATE ADULTS

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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: LITERACY AS PERCEIVED BY ILLITERATE ADULTS

Arlene Fingeret[1]

We are missing half of the picture. We view literacy and lack of literacy from the vantage point of the literate. How do illiterate adults view literacy? There are millions of illiterate adults who are not enrolled in literacy programs. Why not? Do they share our overwhelmingly positive attitude toward learning to read and write? Do they share our condemnation of illiteracy?

In post-industrial America, the literate majority classifies reading and writing with baseball and apple pie, as unquestionably 'good things,' woven into the fabric of middle American life. Literacy is also companion to proper medical care, decent housing, and adequate nutrition, the basic requirements for survival in an otherwise complex society. And literacy is an entitlement, a right, without which an adult is "deprived" and "underprivileged." Research questions in adult literacy have been generated by these assumptions and values. We have learned which of our socio-economic categories illiterate adults fit into, and which of the "rewards" of literate culture they aspire to. We have identified which instructional methods and materials appear most effective in helping illiterate adults master the skill of reading. And we have tried to account for the high attrition rate and low enrollment in literacy programs in terms we can understand: transportation difficulties, child care problems, schedule conflicts, lack of energy, and feelings of embarrassment and isolation. Meanwhile, only a fraction of the estimated number of illiterate adults in the United States have been served by literacy programs in the past decades, and new research initiatives are being sought.

For the past year I have been conducting a qualitative study of illiterate adults in a northeastern American urban area. While the entire research project is broader in scope than the results reported here, it became clear early in the study that illiterate adults appear to share a coherent view of literacy and illiteracy, and that that perspective is connected to their cultural context as well as to their inability to read and write. In this paper, I am presenting the results of a preliminary analysis of the data concerning how illiterate adults, in specific cultural contexts, perceive literacy and illiteracy.

Qualitative researchers, through the use of methods such as participant observation and interviewing, study subjects in their own settings. Two groups of illiterate adults formed the sample for this study. Members of both groups are native English speaking adults who cannot use reading and writing to communicate basic information. One group is currently participating in local literacy programs, and members of the other group are not enrolled in a literacy program, although they may have been enrolled at some point in the past. Data collection included in-depth unstructured interviews with all members of the sample, with additional life history interviewing and participant observation in the homes and work places of some subjects. The adults included in this sample, forty in all, each live in one of three communities in which there is a high proportion of illiterate adults, as well as many of the accompanying "ills" which so often characterize communities in which large numbers of illiterate adults live: poverty, poor housing, and high crime rates. I also interviewed some of the literate members of those communities, and human service professionals who have been serving those communities.

Literacy today, far from being the protected skill of an elite that it

was in centuries past, is identified as essential for full participation as a productive citizen. Charles Jeffries (1967) has said, "In the twentieth century world the person who has not been given the chance to read is deprived of a fundamental human right. 'The illiterate' is a man, or woman, who is condemned to a status which, in the circumstances of today, is less than human" (p. 12). Adults who cannot read, however, often do not identify learning to read as a human right, but as an onerous task that, at best, has tenuous links to the rewards and benefits of society (Drennan, 1980).

Literacy is valued by the literate on two dimensions. First, the objective uses, or functions, of literacy are believed to be necessary in today's print-oriented society. Second, there are certain psychological consequences attributed to literacy which are deemed necessary for "understanding" our complex technological society and for a "positive self image" in a degree and credential-conscious world. Although the functional aspects of literacy would appear self-evident, it has been noted that they are based primarily on the functions of reading and writing among the educated middle class rather than in the cultures of illiterate and poor adults. Recently the assumptions of psychological consequences, such as the ability to think abstractly and the development of flexibility and openness to new ideas, have come under fire also. The work of Scribner and Cole (1981), Lockridge (1974), and Graff (1979), for example, raise serious questions about the cognitive effects of literacy per se. It may be that those differences noted between literate and non-literate people are due more to the effects of differing economic status, culture, and participation in schooling and urbanization than literacy. Hunter and Harman (1979) contend that:

> Literate persons often believe that it is their literacy per se that has been responsible for opening doors for them in the society, conferring social status or economic success, or creating their attitudes. They are inclined, therefore, to endorse literacy campaigns under the illusion that illiteracy is the cause of poverty, ill-health, and the crime-infested neighborhoods in which they see others living...(p. 108)

Hunter and Harman also claim that, "Research suggests that the poverty and the power structures of society are more responsible for low levels of literacy than the reverse" (p. 9) and this thought is echoed by others (Drennan, 1980).

Our perceptions of functionally illiterate adults are based on the projections of literate educators and social scientists, and on interpretations of quantitative research done in the United States. Hunter and Harman, following an exhaustive review of the literature on literacy in the United States, conclude that, "The perceptions, views, and attitudes of clients are notably absent from the bulk of the literature" (p. 66, footnote 4).

John Lowe, of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, has written, "...caring for the disadvantaged is the top priority [for adult educators], those who missed the boat at school and who can't cope with life's challenges because they don't know how the economy and society work (unpublished letter)." We assume that because adults are discouraged about their ability to reap the rewards of society that they do not know how it works. It may be that they know only too well; perhaps it is not their inability to understand but rather the society's refusal to hear their voices.

Malone and Flowers (1980) claim that the general society and the "client" hold different perceptions of what is desirable. Finding few pertinent studies in education, they turned to anthropology and social psychology for insight. Malone and Flowers speak of the need for negotiation, or a process whereby groups share the meanings they hold, to arrive at some common understanding. Hunter and Harman claim that one of the current problems in the United States around the discussion of literacy has been, "...the disregard for what individuals and groups themselves need and want within their own social settings and the imposition of programs believed to be 'good' for them" (p. 14).

The results of the study reported here support the growing re-examination of the literate society's claims about literacy. Illiterate adults in this sample all agree that it would be nice to know how to read and write. But it isn't that simple.

Illiterate adults in this sample share the literate society's understanding of literacy as both something purely instrumental and, at the same time, something more. The ability to read and write would enable them to fill out job applications, read prescriptions, read books, write letters- in short, to operate in a more independent way. The issue, however, is the term "independent." In the highly individualistic world of mainstream America, the positive value of independent action is scarcely to be questioned - although the accompanying "anomie" and "alienation" is certainly a topic of concern. Illiterate adults who live in the literate society would like to share that independence:

> When I travel and I get off at the airport, I want no problems getting to the hotel, going back to the airport, and if it says what terminal I have to be at, I want to find it by reading it.
>
> Illiterate small business owner

Illiterate adults living in communities with many other illiterate adults also would like to share in some measure of independence. As one woman who is learning to read describes:

> Take busses. I couldn't do that before because I couldn't read them. I had to memorize them. Now I can read them...And read prescriptions off the bottles, before I had to call a friend up and spell the word over the phone to her and say, how much do I give this to my child? And now I don't have to do that. I can read it myself...Reading papers that come home with the kids from school...I had to get my girlfirend to help me with it. Now I can do it.

However, this desire for independence, mirroring that of the larger culture and familiar from the literature of adult literacy, is not the entire story. Illiterate adults participate in a web of family, community and societal realtionships that provide a degree of security, regardless of how we, the educated classes, may judge their "health" or value. Their perspectives are often more similar to those found in traditional oral cultures than to those of the larger literate society. In oral cultures, the primary orientation to the transmission of cultural traditions, the primary mode of communicating information, and the primary reference for intentional action are oral

transmission and face-to-face contact. In an oral culture, the focus is on the community, a kind of extended family, rather than on the individual. There is a kind of "division of labor" within the community. In the communities of illiterate adults included in this study, every individual's social network included one or more "readers" and "writers," proficient to different degrees with these skills. These readers may be spouses, children, local business owners, or representatives of agencies or institutions of the literate society, such as employers, public school teachers, parole officers, or welfare case workers. In one family, it works this way: [2]

> ...those family members who can read and write and who have a high school diploma have jobs. Hattie and her sister watch the children for them and do the errands that the others don't have time to do because they are working. In the mornings, Hattie usually runs downtown to pay bills or do some shopping, for herself and for the others...Her sister comes over and watches all the young children who aren't in school yet. The two of them do whatever laundry has accumulated and clean the house and cook. Between them, the family members work it out: who brings in the money, who watches the children, who does the errands and pays the bills, who cooks and cleans...Hattie's very clear that she doesn't really ever think about learning to read or continuing her education. She's very busy.
>
> Excerpt from fieldnotes

Sadie describes another kind of division of labor:

> If I can read and write, and you cannot, then others will say, Sadie, will you read this for me or write this for me?...But then, maybe I cannot read or write, but I can explain it better than she can, and she can read and write. Without reading and writing, you can sit and take it all in...Some people can pray better, some people can sing better, some people can understand and explain better, some people can read and write better - everybody has different talents.
>
> Retired factory worker

The valuing of independence, so central to the literate society, is not as clear cut to illiterate adults living in largely illiterate sub-cultures. The development of literacy skills may entail "losing" one's place in the fabric of social life. Anthropologists Goody and Watt (1968) remind us that,

> We must reckon with the fact that in our civilization writing is clearly an addition, not an alternative, to oral transmission...In Western cultures, the relation between the written and the oral traditions must be regarded as a major problem. (p. 68)

2 All names have been changed to protect the identities of subjects.

This positive sense of community, with illiteracy as one of the characteristics determining an individual's place in the community, creates a tension with the knowledge of how the larger society views "illiterates." One young man describes interacting with literate people in the larger society:

> You got to lie all the time...You got to pretend to read this or that. You just can't say, well, I'm a dummy, I just can't read. Because you got some pride in yourself. It hurts. After a while people look at you and say well, jeez, you know. And I don't like nobody to think that way about me. So the people you're close to, you can explain it to them, and they understand. A total stranger - the first thing they figure is well, the guy's a dummy...and I don't like other people saying, well, don't worry about it, I'll read it for you. That makes me feel like I got a real bad handicap. Like I'm walking around with one leg or something - I don't like that.

Some resolve that tension by limiting their contact with literate society and building a strong community life in a primarily illiterate world. One woman lives with her two children in a large apartment house, providing assistance to neighbors who are dealing with situations she has had to learn to cope with. She describes her role this way:

> I help with, like budgeting their food money, budgeting their money because they don't know how to spend it wise, and when they come down to the last penny, they don't have no money. I hold on to their money, I buy their food, I get their cigarettes, and then they still have money left over...They have money to bank on if they need soap powder or bleach...some people don't knowhow to talk to a lawyer...One time there was this one family, she had to go to the hospital and she come to me to call this free ambulance deal. I called the free ambulance and I watched her baby for her...

Others, also limiting their contact with the literate society, retreat from the world with feelings of defeat and fatalism, such as this woman explains:

> I don't bother with the people next door, don't bother with nobody. Soemtimes my husband takes the kids to church suppers...I don't even go. I just stay home and either lay down and go to sleep or do something around the house...You need to be smart in this day and age...A few years ago, when I was young, you didn't need to be smart...I just mind my own business.

In addition to having access to how the literate society views illiterate adults, the subjects in my sample have ample opportunity to observe educated, literate people in the city, on the television, and in roles they play in the lives of illiterate adults, such as caseworkers and public school administrators.

I found that the illiterate adults I studied share a concept of themselves as having "common sense" while literate, educated people have "book learning." Just as we tend to describe illiterate adults as primarily lacking something, namely the ability to read and write, so do illiterate adults describe literate people as lacking in common sense. Dora describes her concept of common sense for me:

> Common sense is something you have natural. It's natural. But education you have to be taught. An educated person is full of words and book stuff but no action. A person with common sense, they got experience. And they got- they act...People with book stuff, they think they know how something is, but that's not the way it is. And a person with common sense, they did all of this stuff and they got experience, so it's not as easy as just reading it out of a book. Like, a person can sit down and rap to you about something they read in a book, or what's happening in the books, but when it comes down to it, they can't do it, and I find this a lot, in a lot of cases, they can run the stuff down to you, all this stuff out of books, but when it comes down to doing it, they can't do it.

And Tony describes his concept of common sense and reading:

> Question: How did you feel about letting people know you couldn't read?
> Tony: At first, it bothered me. But then I figured, hey, I've got a handicap, but so have they. I know more about life than they do, because what I couldn't do from reading, I had to go out and do. You could pick up a book and learn how to build a car engine. I had to go out with that car engine and learn. So I got better at it than most people...

For many of the illiterate adults in my sample, their positive sense of community combined with this negative image of "literate" people leads them to desire literacy skills only instrumentally; they consciously enter the learning process with the goal of maintaining their "common sense." Tony, for example, is clear about the limits he intends for his development of literacy skills:

> Reading is important, but to a limit. My life isn't going to change anything because I know how to read and write, or if I don't know how to read and write.

Although social scientists currently disagree about the difference between the consequences of literacy and schooling, I found some illiterate adults who believe it is very clear. You can learn how to read, but as long as you limit the amount of additional schooling you participate in, you have a good chance of controlling the psycho-social implications of literacy. Tony continues his explanation:

> I am going to learn how to read, but I will never go to school or college or anything like that, because I don't want to be that educated...it makes you, I think what it does is that it stops the things that's built in me. What it would do to me, I know what it would do to me, it would make me a fool...I'm afraid I'm going to go to school and get educated and before I know it I'm going to say well, I don't want this field no more, I want to do this. I don't want that field no more, I want to do this. Then, before you know it, you're a babbling fool. You know a little bit about everything and actually nothing about anything. That's why educated people are there. They go to school so much and trained themselves and read so much that they know a little bit about everything, but basically they don't know nothing...

Sadie's comments are very similar:

> I think education is good in its own place...I want to learn how to read but I don't want to learn how to read so good that it turns me into a fool, an educated fool. I would like to read good and know math good, but I don't want to make myself better than anybody else, or know more than anybody else...I want to be myself...Those people who have the education, they sit behind a desk. They can read and write better than this person, but this person do the work. Not reading and writing work, but other work they can do better- that's right.

Other descriptors of highly literate, educated people include phrases such as, "can't carry on a decent conversation," "they use lots of words when they ain't saying nothing," and "they don't know how to just relax and have a good time." Now, while a case can be made that these are "sour grapes," judgements of the "have-nots" looking at the "haves," that denies the basic dignity and coherency of this world view. This perspective is real for illiterate adults living in very different circumstances from middle class Americans, and it informs, in part, their actions. There are, of course, illiterate adults who do not share this perspective. They reject the community they have been living in. They want to make grand, sweeping changes in their lives; they want education beyond the high school level, they want to be accepted by the literate society and to reap the benefits of literate, educated people. Patricia describes her reasons for entering a literacy program this way:

> I couldn't see it, no, waiting every month for my check, sitting on my butt all day long, next thing you know, have fifty kids around. I look at my friends, I look at some people that I don't even know, and I say, all them kids...The way they look, I cannot see myself being on public assistance for the rest of my life. I have to get a job. And if I have to get a job, I got to learn my reading, I got to go to school, I got to learn my math...I don't want my past to be my future. I don't know what the future will be, but it will be

better for me and my little boy.

Even these strong feelings, however, may not be enough to give up what is known, what is secure. Six months later, Patricia dropped out of the literacy program. She explains why:

> I got scared. If only I knew what was ahead for me. What it would be like. I can't seem to give up hanging around with my friends at night, staying up too late to make it to class in the morning. It's lonely there. At home, I have my friends. When I learn to read, it'll be just me and my little boy.

In conclusion, this preliminary analysis of data from a sample of illiterate adults in an urban area appears to indicate that illiteracy is viewed on a continuum. At one end, it is most postively tied to one's place in the community. At the other end, it is most negatively identified as a degrading lack in the eyes of the larger society. In the context of communities in which large numbers of illiterate adults live, highly educated, literate people appear almost dysfunctional against the backdrop of oral traditions. Learning to read and write, by itself, is not necessarily perceived as threatening to social relationships, as long as one knows where to draw the line. Schooling, however, is seen as a path out of the ghetto.

Obviously, more research is needed. A more complete analysis of the data from this study will produce additional insights and a more clearly articulated framework. Additional studies of this kind- qualitative field studies - are needed with adults in other urban areas as well as in rural America. Future studies should include adults who have been counted as "successes" of literacy programs.

But even at this early stage , these research results deserve thoughtful consideration. Social scientists and literacy educators have acted as though the only perspective on literacy that really matters is their own. Programs are designed to "motivate," "organize," and to make people "ready" to learn to read.

In this era of universal compulsory primary schooling in the United States, we tend to look at an illiterate adult as a "unit of failure" and to ask psychologically-oriented questions to inform our actions. If we examine the social structure, however, and the dynamic between adults and their environment, we begin to see cracks in the stereotypes. Clearly, this research has important implications for our practice as educators; literacy programs have been individually rather than group or community oriented, except for that small number of educators trying to adapt the work of Paulo Freire to the United States. By ignoring the positive virtues of the social structure, we have forced the choice of community vs. independence. The results of this research should cause us to pause, to re-evaluate the basis on which we identify illiteracy as a social problem in America, and the moral righteousness with which we talk of "eradicating" illiteracy. When we view illiteracy and literacy from the perspective of adults who are unable to read and write and who live with large numbers of other adults who are unable to read and write, we do not see just the reflection of ourselves, minus literacy skills. We see a different picture.

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